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the lever

"Give me a place to stand and I will move the Earth." – Archimedes

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Finding true love

Gay teens search for a place

by Mary Margaret Nussbaum

Brittany Weber is nobody's baby, but to hear her tell it, in high school she was quite the teen dream.

"I decided I wasn't going to be gay," says this twenty-something local advocate for gay rights. "So, I ignored it. I dated all the boys. I fully compensated, probably overcompensated in the heterosexuality department."

But Weber always knew this wasn't where her heart lay.

"I realized I was gay when I was 15 or 16 years old, but there was a realization of something different before that, ever since, like, camp in eighth grade. But, I didn't have a word for it."

After Weber left home and entered college she found that word.

I really came out [as a lesbian] freshman year. I met a woman and we had a relationship. I knew I was a lesbian and I became very cool with it."

Coming to terms with her own sexuality was the first step in a long journey.

"I wrote my parents an eight page letter my sophomore year and then didn't answer the phone for like three months. My family took it very poorly. Your parents have all these expectations—you're going to get married, have kids and be fabulous. It's not hate or anger, it's disappointment. It's taken years to mend our relationship."

Weber tells homosexual teens not to come out if there is a possibility that they will be kicked out of their house.

"Coming out is such a process. You have to be so ready to do it and so confident in yourself that you'll be able to rebuke any terrible things that you're going to hear. It's hard."

Gay teenagers are neither here nor there. They live in a sort of identity limbo—one foot firmly planted on the prom dance floor and the other stumbling on less trod paths. For the teenagers who go through this alone, the confusion can be overwhelming.

Many do not feel comfortable coming out to their families and the idea of confiding in their friends is terrifying.

Few high schools have bi/gay/lesbian clubs though they are found on most every college campus. Earlier this year, the Salt Lake City Board of Education banned all school clubs that are not class-related after a controversy surrounding gay clubs.

It is estimated (though widely debated) that one out of every ten people is homosexual. In 1991, the complaints of Senator Jesse Helms (R—N.C.) led the Department of Health and Human Services to cancel what was to be the largest ever study of sexual behavior and teenagers.

Ground Zero, a nonprofit local gay rights organization, sponsors Inside/Out a support and activity group for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in the Pikes Peak Region. The group meets once a week.

"They come in like a bunch of banshees," says Weber. "They're amazing. They can come in here and be who they need to be and who they want to be. I think that's the worst thing about being gay in high school—you never meet anybody; you don't go through that lust and teenage love and having the first love of your life. When you're an adult you have to start that whole process over."

Many of the teenagers at Inside/Out have not told their family and friends that they are gay. With the other kids, one night a week, they find a safe place.

A study done by the Department of Health and Human Services showed that among 500 gay and lesbian San Francisco teens, 30 percent had attempted suicide at least once. Nationally, it is estimated that gay teens are three times more likely to take their life than are straight teens.

Julia Kenyon (not her real name), a Palmer student, is one of the lucky ones. She is out to her family, friends, and co-workers though most of her classmates don't know.

Her eyes are direct and her words soft-spoken.

"I've watched men [crap] all over my mother my entire life," Kenyon says.

"I realize that my girlfriend was born gay but with me it's like I could have gone either way. I've been in relationships with guys before and in some ways this is not that different. It's just that with women there's more emotional closeness. You know more about each other, so you know what they need."

Kenyon met her girlfriend of two years, who she describes with a smile as being wonderful, at a point when she was just beginning to come to terms with being a lesbian.

"As a teen you're trying to decide who you are; what kind of music to listen to, what to do on the weekends, what fashion you like. It's so much harder to figure out who you like too."

"When I came out it wasn't like I made an announcement. I told one person and they told five and they each told ten. The people who didn't like it stayed away and the people who didn't care just told me how much they loved me."

Though Kenyon says she surrounds herself with a support system, it's her confidence and poise that get her through the times when she's walking down the street with her girlfriend, holding hands and a man yells "You're the reason I can't get a date!"

"I have this little pink triangle on a binder," Kenyon says. "This guy [in class] said 'Hey maybe you and your girlfriend could come over and we could...'" her voice trails off. "That's pretty common," she says.

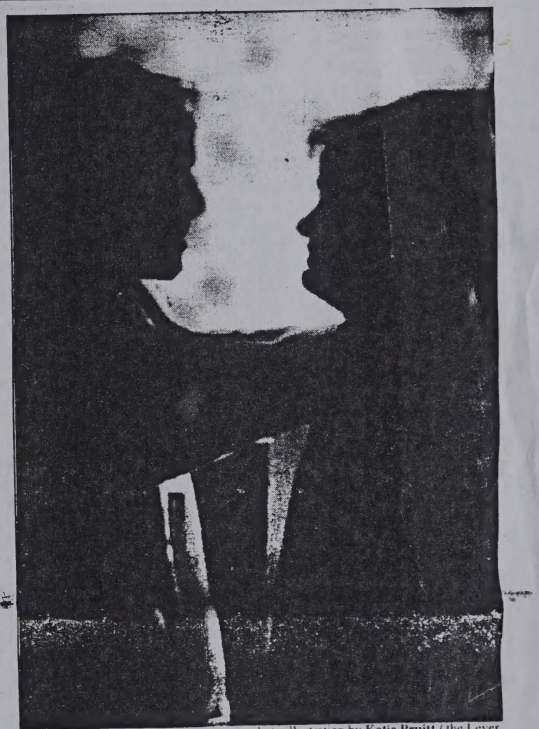


photo illustration by Katie Pruitt / the Lever

Many gay teens struggle with the challenge of whether or not to tell their families and friends.

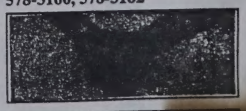
"I know society says 'faggot' and 'gays' and bla bla bla. But pretty much if you don't accept me, you don't need to be around me."

She plans to catch an Ani DiFranco concert this week and move in with her girlfriend come January. After earning some more money she'll be off to college where she hopes to become a child psychologist.

It's a Saturday night at the Penthouse, a local gay dance club and bar. At 2 the doors open for all ages. The kids begin to file in. Two guys around 17 years old come in holding hands. They let go only long enough to dig their ID's and three bucks out of their pockets. Inside the small dance floor is clouded from the fog machine. Some couples are slow dancing, their steps together, but falling out of time with the house music which the deejay spins. A blond haired boy swirls about, his loafers sliding as he lip syncs "Oh hell yeah/only love can set you free/set you free" The two hours fly by, the last song is played and the dancers, now a little sweaty and very sleepy, gather their coats and their friends.

"You guys take care," the deejay bids them good-bye, "we're here for you, okay?"

National Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Youth Hotline— 800-347-8336
INSIDE/OUT Youth Group— 578-3160, 578-3162



The [illegible]

If Palmer had the

Conventional marriage constricts love

Lori Schroeder

Patrick is in love. Blissful love. He dreams of a future with his sweetheart in a little white house with a garden and a porch swing. He wants a dog—maybe even children. He wants to get married.

But Patrick has a problem. He is gay, and same-sex marriage is either illegal or unrecognized in every state in the U.S. So there will be no wedding, no reception, no flowers, no rings. He has no real way to seal the love he feels so deeply. Society has declared heterosexual love somehow more deserving of the great union of marriage than homosexual love.

The recent proposed legislation that would legalize same-sex marriage in Hawaii has created a roar of debate that sweeps across religious and political lines. At the heart of the issue is the definition of marriage. President Clinton recently signed the "Sanctity of Marriage Act" that allows states to both outlaw and refuse to recognize same-sex marriage in order to protect the "sanctity" of an institution that has traditionally been heterosexual. There are bills that would define marriage as an institution strictly between a man and a women currently pending in forty state legislatures.

But ask any one what they think a marriage should be based on, and you probably won't hear anything about sexual orientation. The first thing that comes to our minds is love. Romantic love. True love. And regardless of our personal feelings toward homosexuality, this type of love can and does exist between same-sex couples.

The debate over whether to allow same sex marriage is not synonymous with the debate over the validity of homosexuality itself. There are many homosexuals—no way around it. The question is if it is in the best interest of the rest of society to allow these couples to marry. The homosexual community has historically been labeled as promiscuous. They carry the blame for the spread of AIDS and various other sexually transmitted diseases that now burden the heterosexual community as well. Until recently, devoted relationships for gays and lesbians seemed impossible due to the overwhelming social stigma that being homosexual entailed. Being forced into an "underground" lifestyle puts pressure on gays to remain low-key or anonymous. And this anonymity makes it easy to be irresponsible. If we would allow and recognize devoted same-sex couples, we would see many more gay and lesbians reentering society in productive and responsible ways.

Legalizing same-sex marriage will not change the fundamental premise of marriage. It will merely allow devoted gay couples the rights so many straight couples take for granted, including power of attorney, joint health care and insurance, and shared inheritance rights. Legalizing same-sex marriage would not necessarily give couples adoption rights. The issue remains confined to how a legal and accepted union would affect the lives of two gay people in love.

The true threat to the sanctity of marriage lies in our refusal to admit that love and devotion can exist only between a man and a woman. The moment we lose sight of the larger picture—the reason for marriage in the first place, is the moment its meaning is lost.

For a moment try to understand how Patrick must feel. Let yourself be open to the possibility that love is not a reserved emotion, valid only between a man and a woman. The idea of legalizing same-sex marriage is not as radical as it may seem. We live in an evolving society, and our concept of marriage must evolve along with it. In doing so we are not sacrificing the value of marriage; in fact, we are reaffirming the nature of love.

Lori Michelle Schroeder is a junior and staff writer.

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Briefs

Education

CFV protests Palmer story on gay teens

A front-page Palmer High School student newspaper article detailing the difficulties of being a gay or lesbian teen-ager has rankled the president of the District 11 Board of Education, as well as Colorado for Family Values Chairman Will Perkins.

The article, written by editor-in-chief Mary Margaret Nussbaum, appeared in the Oct. 24 issue of Palmer High's monthly student newspaper, *The Lever*.

Both Perkins and board president Kent Olvey said they believe the material in the story is "inappropriate" for a high-school student newspaper. Perkins met with Palmer principal Jay Engeln the day after the article appeared and said he and at least two parents plan to take their complaints to the school board's regular meeting Wednesday, Nov. 6.

Olvey conceded he had not yet read the article, but said he believes student newspapers should reflect the "traditional Judeo-Christian heterosexual standard of the community and not give credibility to other lifestyles."

He said he would have been just as displeased had the article advocated overthrowing the government or supported sado-masochism or bestiality. "We don't think this has anything to do with the First Amendment," he said.

However, Marge Easton of the Colorado Press Association disagreed. "The beast in me says this is indeed a First Amendment issue," she said. "God help us."

State law enables students to publish stories on any subject, as long as the articles are not obscene, libelous, slanderous, false or inflammatory. It also encourages teachers and advisors to teach and encourage free expression, Easton said.

Olvey said he believes the policy on student newspaper content should be reviewed, although he doubts anyone will be disciplined for the article in question.

The story, headlined "Finding true love," discusses the sometimes-painful process teen-agers go through coming to terms with their homosexuality and cites studies showing gay teens are more likely to commit suicide than straight teens. It does not "out" anyone or endorse homosexuality, but it does give as a resource the telephone number of Inside/Out, a county-sponsored youth group for gay teen-agers. *The Lever* article is the first story on gay and lesbian teens that has been published in a student publication locally, according to the group's director.

Nussbaum said she was surprised by the attention the article has received. "This wasn't supposed to glamorize gay teen-agers, and I don't think it did," she said. "We try to cover all the issues, and this was something we had never addressed before. On last month's cover, we did a story on the football team."

— Cara DeGette

Quotes

■ **"I'm about as good as a zebra in plaid."** — CFV Chairman Will Perkins, known for his folksy witticisms ■ **"The school board is fairly conservative right now."** — District 11 board president Kent Olvey, discussing his distaste for an article in the Palmer student newspaper on gay teens ■ **"If it were unlawful, I'm sure there would be people in jail all over the place."** — Colorado Press Association Legislative Liaison Marge Easton on the status of homosexual behavior under Colorado law

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